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# There's No Such Thing as A "War on the Cheap"

In a recent interview with Ethiopian television, Prime Minister Meles asserted that the war with Eritrea has had a negligible impact on Ethiopia's economic performance. If the Prime Minister's assertion is correct, then his party has found something rare in the annals of war—an "economically painless" way to engage in a destructive war. Indeed, the idea of "war on the cheap" is extremely seductive. But is there such a thing as a "war on the cheap?" Or can one engage in a full-scale war and self-finance development projects simultaneously, especially if the country in question is as resource poor as Ethiopia? No, not really. It has never been done before.

Unless one is living in an Orwellian world where war is peace and peace is war, where a word conveys the opposite of what it means, any suggestion of "war on the cheap" is a cruel hoax. War is synonymous with the waste of people, lives, dreams and resources. In the short run it may be associated with short-lived expansion of a sector of the economy, but in the end war saps the productive capacity of any economy. Prime Minister Meles, for example, could not have missed the negative impact of armed conflicts on economic and social development. As one of the four co-chairs of the Global Coalition for Africa, this is what the Prime Minister wrote in the Forward to the Coalition's most recent (1999-2000) report:

> *The war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, whatever our views on its origin, was nevertheless regrettable. Of equal concern are the continuing conflicts in Angola, the Sudan, Sierra Leone, and the two Congos—inflicting considerable loss of life, great human suffering, destruction of infrastructure and productive capacity, and reversals of economic and social gains. We hope that definitive and lasting resolutions will be found for these hostilities, as indeed appears be the case for the Sierra Leone's civil war and the Eritrea-Ethipia conflict.*

The disjunction between Prime Minister Meles' words and actions is disconcerting. Although he understood clearly that armed conflicts and development don't mix, he has gone out of his way to frustrate the search for a durable peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Instead of making good faith effort to settle the conflict, the Prime Minster has attempted to reassure the international community and his own people that the war has had a minimal impact on Ethiopia's economy. The cause of Prime Minister Meles' assertion that all was fine was the 1999-2000 Annual Report of the Global Coalition for Africa which, according to the Prime Minister, indicated that Ethiopia's economy performed well during the first seven years since the TPLF assumed power in Ethiopia in 1991. Nineteen hundred and ninety seven particularly caught the Prime Minister's attention. And for a good reason. The 6.2 percent Gross Domestic Product growth for 1997 that the Prime Minister cited is impressive, especially when compared to sub-Saharan Africa's 3.1 percent.

Never mind for the moment that the previous year Ethiopia received from the international community grants and aid amounting to US $860 million which explains the 1997's robust performance. It's understandable that the Prime Minister did not want to draw attention to the degree to which Ethiopia is dependent on external assistance for its economic sustenance. Obviously the hand that "giveth" is the same one that "taketh" away if it is displeased by anything the beneficiary does or fails to do in contravention to its wishes. The Prime Minister clearly knows this and that's why he does not want to draw any attention to the donor community's role, although he knows that the community knows that Ethiopia's economic performance is contingent on the West continuing its generous largess.

But even without this caveat, the figure, as anyone who knows a thing or two about these sort of things would tell you, is misleading. The Prime Minister is misusing statistics for his purpose, a practice not peculiar to him. People lie with statistics all the time. It is said time and again that statistics, if handled properly, can say whatever you want them to say. The Prime Minister is trying to give the impression that his economic policy alone is responsible for the good performance of the economy and that the war had not affected the economy's forward march.

Prime Minister Meles got his figure from Table 1.1 of the 1999-2000 Annual Report of the Global Coalition for Africa of which he is a co-chair. The Report gave figures for 1998 as it did for 1997 for Ethiopia, Eritrea and the rest of Africa. Inquiring minds want to know why the Prime Minister cited 1997 and not 1998. One possible answer could be that the figure for 1998, the year when the war first broke out, told a different story. Indeed it did. In 1998 Ethiopia's economy did not grow at all, in part because of the negative effects of the war and in part due to insufficient rainfall. While the rainfall was beyond



the Prime Minister's control, the war continues to be his own doing. Growing one year at 6.2 percent only to be followed by zero percent the following year, was a huge drop off. Like the clever politician that he is, the Prime Minister was trying to paint a good picture. But by doing so he was hiding the ugly truth about the true cost of the war from his own people. As any consumer of development statistics should know, and one assumes the Prime Minister is voracious consumer, per capita growth rate, a figure that takes into account population size, is a much better measurement of economic performance, not withstanding its documented limitations. On page 41 of the Global Coalition for Africa Report, per capita figures for Ethiopia, and for the rest of Africa are given. The Prime Minister skipped this page. Why? Because using the more conventional per capita GDP would have cut the 1997 figure down to 3.5 percent. And the 1998 figure? The figure actually showed that Ethiopia's economy contracted by 2.5 percent. When one is in the business of bragging as most politicians are wont to do, 6.2 percent sounds much better than 3.5 percent and a negative 2.5 percent although the lower figures were closer to the true state of the Ethiopian economy in 1997 and 1998. Surely, the figure the Prime Minister gave was misleading, but hey, who cares about what the locals thought. To this day Ethiopians are still unclear why there's war with Eritrea. Only the Prime Minister and the handful of Politburo members of the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray, the group ruling Ethiopia know for sure the rationale for the war.

What about if President Isaias of Eritrea were to read from the same page the Prime Minister got his figures? According to the specific Table in the Report the Prime Minister used, Eritrea's GDP growth for 1997 was 7.9 percent, compared to Ethiopia's 6.2 percent. And for 1998? Eritrea's growth rate fell to 3.0 percent, but was still much higher than Ethiopia's zero growth rate. If we take the more conventional measurements, Eritrea's per capita growth rate for 1997 and 1998 were 4.9 percent and 0.2 percent, again much higher than Ethiopia's 3.5 percent and negative 2.5 percent. Does that mean President Isaias should celebrate Eritrea's economic performance? Not really. That the Eritrean economy rose from the ashes of the 30 year war with numbers better than Ethiopia's may be a cause for some satisfaction. But then how much effort would it take to surpass the TPLF's Ethiopia? The 1999 Human Development Report ranked 174 countries on the basis of their "Human Development Index." Canada took the top honor. At the bottom was the failed state of Sierra Leone. And scraping bottom, a mere two slots from the cellar and ranked 172 is Ethiopia. Not far from Ethiopia, just five slots away, ranked 167, is Eritrea. Eritrea's marginal improvement over Ethiopia's cannot be a cause for celebration for Eritrea. In reality, how much difference is there whether one is ranked 167 or 172 out of 174? Not much. Even the

fact that Eritrea's per capita income (US $200) is twice that of Ethiopia (US $110) does not give Eritrea any bragging rights. Both are poor—poor, even by Sub-Saharan Africa's standards. According to the International Monetary Fund's note of August 16, 1999, Ethiopia's per capita income of US $110 is "one-fourth the average of sub Saharan Africa and just about the lowest in the world."

The rankings in the Human Development Report reveal the absurdity of the Eritrea-Ethiopia war. If ever there were two countries who have no business picking a fight with each other, of spending one red penny on arms, it must be these two Horn of Africa countries. One side realizes the madness of using scarce resources for destruction and is willing to accept international mediation. The other has turned a deaf ear to plea from the international community to turn its back on war and its attention to development. As we enter the twentieth month of the terrible conflict the Prime Minister and the shadowy Marxist-Leninst League of Tigray leadership group to whom he is ultimately answerable are holding peace hostage to ever escalating demands, making it abundantly clear that if peace is to come it has to be on their terms. Unfortunately the terms they are demanding make a mockery of international law and the Organization of Africa Unity's Charter. By refusing to implement the framework of principles for settling the dispute which both sides have already accepted, and threatening to continue the war if Ethiopia did not get its way, the Prime Minister and the Marxists in the ruling party have turned their country into a rogue state.

Given that its people are wracked by famine and AIDS, the last thing Ethiopia needs is to spend unnecessarily on arms. According to the latest Food and Agricultural Organization report, forty percent of Ethiopia's population are threatened by famine and need emergency food assistance. AIDS has incapacitated 2.6 million adults. Too few school children are enrolled in school. Too few have access to health facilities. Too many mothers are dying at childbirth. In the face of all these, Ethiopia's leaders have opted for war, when there's absolutely no need for it. The international community has been saying as much from day one of the conflict.

The real cost of this bloody war is the lost opportunity to improve the lives of people who deserve better. As Prime Minister Meles knows too well, even if the people of Ethiopia do not, financing from the international donor community for humanitarian and development activities has been used to underwrite the war. The international community is well aware of its role in prolonging the suffering of millions of civilians and its contribution to the destruction of infrastructure of the two countries. Ultimately the hands that "giveth" are the same one that "taketh" away. The international community may not have the power to bring the Prime Minister to the peace table, but



the world has no obligation to finance his minority-controlled government's war against its northern neighbor.

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